

an open letter

why we don't work on spec



In the process of choosing a design firm, organizations will often include in their Requests for Proposal a solicitation of creative thinking, strategic thinking, or design concepts to be produced on a speculative basis by the professionals they're considering.

This approach not only seriously compromises the quality of work clients are entitled to, but also violates a tacit, longstanding ethical standard in the communications design profession worldwide. American Institute of Graphics Arts (AIGA) and its affiliate members – which includes Anderson Mraz Design – strongly discourage the practice of requesting that work be produced and submitted on a speculative basis in order to be considered for acceptance on a project.

Clients deserve appropriate and responsive work.

Successful design work results from a collaborative process between a client and the design firm, developing a clear sense of the client's objectives, competitive situation, and needs. Speculative design competitions or processes result in a superficial assessment of the problem and can only result in work that is judged on a superficial basis. Design creates value for clients as a result of the strategic approach taken in addressing the problems or needs of the client, and only at the end of that process is a "design" created. Speculative or open competitions for work based on a perfunctory problem statement will not result in the best solution for the client.

Capable and professional designers do not work for free.

While there will always be design firms willing to create work in response to an open call – without any assurance of compensation – those who are most in demand are the ones who work according to the professional standards of the industry. And when the buyer relegates his choices to those who are least likely to be experienced, that choice often results in having to bring a more experienced designer into a project in order to execute it. Of course, this change usually results in additional expenditures that impact your return on investment in design services.

Requesting work for free demonstrates a lack of understanding and respect.

Requesting work for free reflects a lack of understanding and respect for the value of effective design as well as the time of the professionals who are asked to provide it. This approach, therefore, reflects on your personal practices and standards and may be harmful to the professional reputation of both you and your business or organization.

Few professions exist in which all possible candidates are asked to do the work first, allowing the buyer to choose which one to pay. Consider the response, for example, if you were to ask a dozen lawyers to write a brief for you, after which you would choose which to use (and therefore which to pay). Or if you were to sample every menu item at a restaurant, paying only for your favorite. We realize that there are some creative professions with a different set of standards, such as advertising and architecture, where billings are substantial and continuous after you select a firm of record. But, in these cases, you are not receiving the final outcome for free, up front, like you would if you were receiving a communications design solution.

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There is an appropriate way to explore the work of design firms!

A more effective and ethical approach to requesting work is to ask firms to submit examples of their work from previous assignments, as well as a statement of how they would approach your project. You can then judge for yourself the quality of the firm's work. When you make a selection, that firm can begin to work on your project by designing strategic solutions to your criteria while under contract to you, without having to work free on speculation up front.

In the end, this approach ensures a more effective, professional, and profitable process for everyone involved.

Sincerely,

CK Anderson
founding principal | creative director
Anderson Mraz Design
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About AIGA www.aiga.org

AIGA, the professional association for design, is the oldest and largest membership association for professionals engaged in the discipline, practice and culture of designing. AIGA was founded in 1914 and now represents more than 17,000 designers through national activities and local programs developed by 54 chapters and more than 150 student groups.

AIGA supports the interests of professionals, educators and students who are engaged in the process of designing. The association is committed to stimulating thinking about design, demonstrating the value of design and enabling success for designers throughout the arc of their careers.